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SUBJECT: BAD AIR BLANKETS NORTHERN THAILAND

REF: 05 CHIANG MAI 68

¶1. Summary: Air quality in Chiang Mai, always poor during the February-April dry season, reached new heights of hazard on March 19 when air monitors recorded PM-10 particulate matter at double the Thai standard. The pollution is caused by a combination of practices, including agricultural burning, construction, trash burning, forest fires, warming fires, barbecue vendors and vehicle exhaust. The Consulate has made efforts to combat illegal burning in the area around our residential housing compound via appeals to local authorities. End summary

¶2. Although daily statistics since February 1 show that Chiang Mai air quality in 2006 has been generally better than in 2005 (reftel), an environmental air monitoring machine inside the old town and another 7 kilometers out both spiked into the "very unhealthy" levels on March 19. A rare rain ten days later brought the numbers into the "good" range for a time.

¶3. Chiang Mai's PM-10 level (the quantity of particle matter less than 10 micrometer in diameter) exceeded the Thai official standard of 120 on 13 days in March. By way of comparison, the closest Bangkok monitoring station to the Embassy, at Din Daeng, recorded only one day over 120 in March. Chiang Mai particulate levels climbed on March 19 to a high of 248, versus Din Daeng's high for the month of 149 on March 16.

¶4. It what has now become an annual ritual, the Social Research Institute of Chiang Mai University organized a conference March 27 to discuss air quality in Chiang Mai and Lamphun. In the absence of any Thai government statements about the issue, two speakers sought to raise alarm about the effects of high pollution levels by citing U.S. Consulate discussions several years back about possible evacuation of employees. One noted that U.S. Consulate officers receive extra pay (i.e. hardship differential) in compensation for the health impact of poor air quality.

¶5. In another echo of previous years, Chiang Mai Governor Suwat Tantipat announced a call center for citizens to report illegal burning. The call center in turn is to forward complaints to local administration offices, which are under instructions from the Governor to order anyone found lighting fires to stop immediately. Although a similar hotline last year proved ineffective, callers to date report that the center, set up on March 1, has been available to take complaints.

¶6. The Consulate's ongoing appeals for assistance from the local government to help stop illegal burning near our residential housing compound in Tambon Ban Waen in Hang Dong district have met mixed success. After several tries we have received responses from both the Tambon Administrative Organization (TAO) and the District Officer (Nai Amphur). These exchanges revealed, however, that the authorities are strongly disinclined to take action against anything perceived as agricultural burning.

¶7. Ban Waen TAO President Somsak Kanta told the Consulate that the quantity of agricultural waste was too large for farmers to compost and claimed that this kind of burning is traditional and not illegal. An officer from Hang Dong district, Nantawit Ngeonchaiyapom, said the only complaints have come from the Consulate. Nevertheless, the Hang Dong District Officer told all local offices to take actions to prevent burning.

¶8. Comment: With only the two Chiang Mai monitoring machines and one in Lampang providing air quality data for the entire northern region of Thailand, specifics about the sources and sites of the worst pollution are hard to pin down. Even without data, however, the extent of the problem is obvious; a recent flight from Yunnan to Chiang Mai showed a carpet of haze blanketing the mountains of southern China and the Burma-Thailand-Laos triangle. Here in Chiang Mai, our eyes and respiratory systems confirm that the air is bad for health; local clean air advocates hope that public attention to the issue will lead to the realization that hazy skies are bad for a tourism-dependent economy as well.

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